

The Fear of the Lord Is the Beginning of Wisdom

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For quite a number of years we in our synod had realized that we would have to undertake a considerable expansion of our preparatory schools and colleges in order to meet the growing need for more pastors and teachers. Before starting on such an expansion program, however, our synod wanted some more information as to how much to expand, where to build, what the need for pastors and teachers might be ten years from now, twenty years from now. To obtain the answer to these and similar questions, it was decided to engage a firm of educational consultants. We have the results before us. As might have been expected, however, questions dealing with such purely external matters as to where to build, how to build, how large to build, soon raised other questions that were not so external: namely, what the purpose and goal of our educational program is, how best to accomplish that purpose, the quality of our educational program, the staffing of our schools, accreditation of our schools in relationship to other schools in this country.

Here, of course, we are touching on matters that deal with our very lifeblood as a church, our faith and confession, that which sets us and our educational program apart from the world about us. Here the gospel is involved, so precious to us, but an offense and stumbling block to the world as such. Here are matters, here are questions which we cannot and dare not defer to others. We must answer these questions ourselves. We must weigh; we must evaluate; we must judge as to what our aim and goal and purpose are in our educational program, and what it is that we hope to accomplish!

What is it that we hope to accomplish at Saginaw, at Mequon, at Milwaukee, at Watertown, at New Ulm, at Mobridge – at our synod's educational institutions? To begin with, we might say that we are concerned with the preparation of consecrated pastors and teachers for work in our church. In the students trained at these institutions, and through them, we hope to preserve for our church and for our children and for as many others as we can reach that which we have received. Certainly, it is not merely knowledge or education for education's sake that we want to impart at these schools or in our church, but a way of life, a wisdom which we value so highly that we are willing to maintain and expand these schools entirely apart from and separate from the schools of the land. Yet the word "wisdom" means many things to many people, and it is essential that we remain ever aware of what true wisdom is. To that end let us consider a well-known passage of holy Scripture this morning in which God reminds us once again that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

Here lies the test according to which all education, also our education, will finally be judged. What does wisdom mean to us? What is it that we want to learn? What is it that we want our children to learn? Is it merely to read fluently? To speak eloquently? To know the history of man and the geography of the earth? Does it count as wisdom for us that man is able to push back the bounds of the unknown, able to produce new inventions and devise great machines? Or does it count as wisdom to become a success in whatever one undertakes; to gain honor and respect among our fellow men; to reach a certain amount of financial security? Our answer as Christians is obviously "no" to such questions. These things do not constitute wisdom in our

eyes, though they may be gifts of God that we use and enjoy. In which direction, then, does wisdom lie for us? Is it that we become thoroughly grounded in the Word of God, familiar with its teachings, so that we are able to present its doctrines and proclaim its gospel far and wide? That is surely one of our aims. But if we go no further, then we have not so much as touched true wisdom. Nothing else will do but God's fiat statement: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

Well ought we note this word of our Lord and carefully consider what the fear of the Lord truly is. There is a fear of the Lord which by no means indicates wisdom in the human heart. Such was the fear of the Lord which Adam and Eve once experienced when they had violated his holy Word and then fled in fear before the presence of God. Theirs was a fear of God which comes to all men because of sin, a "certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation," the kind of horrible fear of which Isaiah wrote: "And they shall go into the holes of the rocks, and into the caves of the earth, for fear of the Lord." Such fear of God even the devils have, of whom we read that the "devils also believe and tremble." Far from being the beginning of wisdom, such fear is but a forerunner of judgment, perdition, damnation.

Altogether different is that fear of the Lord which goes hand in hand with wisdom. Rather than running from God, it is a fear that draws close to God in trust and confidence, "Ye that fear the Lord, trust in the Lord: he is their help and their shield." It is the fear of an Abraham who feared the Lord with such love and trust that at a word from God he was ready to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac. Rather than hiding from God and shamelessly playing the hypocrite before him, it is a fear that praises and glorifies: "Ye that fear the Lord, praise him, all ye the seed of Jacob, glorify him." Rather than loving that which is evil, it is a fear that hates evil, "The fear of the Lord is to hate evil." Moses put it this way, "And now, Israel, what doth the Lord thy God require of thee, but to fear the Lord thy God, to walk in his ways, and to love him, and to serve the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul."

Here lies true wisdom, and "the merchandise of it is better than the merchandise of silver, and the gain thereof than fine gold." Here is marrow to our bones, health to our body, life to our soul. Here is wisdom, true wisdom, so rare in this world of ours, a world that excels in all manner of knowledge, skills, and achievements – but a world that is void of wisdom, so that "wisdom crieth without, she uttereth her voice in the streets," and none heareth her. Hereby must all education, also our education, be tested. Over against this fear of the Lord, this one wisdom, our education either stands or falls. Lacking this, all is foolishness, all is vanity, all is abomination, all is death!

Knowing this, let us note another fact: namely, that *this is a wisdom, this fear of the Lord, which only God can teach*. What do we find when we examine ourselves, as we are by nature, when we put ourselves, our accomplishments, yes, our education, to the test? We find fear of men, love of pleasure, trust in ourselves, confidence in our own wisdom, reliance on our own skills, but an utter, total lack of that fear of the Lord which is the beginning of wisdom, for coupled with it all is sin! It's not someone else's sin; it's our sin – secret sin, open sin, refined sin, coarse sin, sin which does not walk in all the ways of the Lord and by no means serves him with all our heart and all our soul. That's our picture, as we are by nature, devoid of true fear of the Lord, devoid of true wisdom, knowing only folly, striving after utter foolishness. Thus we should remain, if left to ourselves, knowing nothing else, teaching nothing else, with all our efforts, with all our skills, with all our knowledge, with all our wisdom. "There is none righteous, no, not one; There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all

gone out of the way... There is no fear of God before their eyes.” Thus does God include us all under one judgment – as we are by nature: No fear of God! No wisdom!

By what right, then, do we set up schools and presume to teach? By what right do we make so bold as to send out pastors and teachers to train others? By our right as Christians! Most fortunately for us, God is not only a holy God; he is also a loving, merciful God, who has come to us in all our blindness and folly and once again opened our eyes and hearts to that true wisdom which is the fear of the Lord. This God did when he called us to faith in Christ, through whom we have forgiveness, through whom we have life, through whom we have salvation – and also wisdom. “But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God.” Suddenly we find Christ in the center of the picture, and what a tremendous change that makes, for now Christ has become the wisdom of God for us who knew no wisdom. This is true, because where Christ is, where faith is, where forgiveness is, there is also the fear of God, the beginning of wisdom. “There is forgiveness with thee,” the psalmist exclaimed, “that thou mayest be feared.” He might have said, “There is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be loved – or that thou mayest be trusted – or that thou mayest be glorified – or that men might walk in thy ways – or that men might once again know true wisdom.” In any event, it all flows out of our forgiveness in Christ, even as he said: “I am the vine, ye are the branches. He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit.” Do we recognize our own utter unworthiness? Have we tasted the exceedingly sweet gospel of forgiveness in Christ? If so, then the fear of the Lord, the beginning of wisdom, has entered our heart. True, our faith mingles with unbelief; our spirit strives with flesh; our fear of the Lord is not always one of love and trust; our beginning of wisdom is often contaminated with more of our natural folly. Yet, where we can pray, “Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief,” there we can also pray, “Lord, I behold thy wisdom; help thou my foolishness.” Yes, God alone can help; God alone can give it – this priceless, precious wisdom, this fear of the Lord, which comes with faith and forgiveness in Christ. Ever are we in need of the prayer, “Teach me thy way, O Lord: I will walk in thy truth; unite my heart to fear thy name.” But let us not forget God’s gracious answer, “Come, ye children, hearken unto me: I will teach you the fear of the Lord.”

Need we be reminded, however, that to the world as such this is all foolishness? Is it necessary to recall the apostle’s words, “For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness”? Let no Christian, no Christian teacher, no Christian pastor ever think otherwise. Our wisdom, based as it is on Christ crucified, will always be the height of foolishness to the world as long as it stands. And therein lies a deadly temptation: that we change or modify or accommodate our educational system, our educational philosophy, to that of the world about us; that we change Christ crucified to Christ the teacher, Christ the great example. Christ the good man. We can in that way regain the world’s favor. We can in that way once again receive the world’s honor and acclaim for our wisdom, our education. But it is a deadly temptation, for if we so much as try it, all wisdom has left us. We shall then have sunk back into the folly out of which God had called us. Others have done it and have fallen under the dreadful judgment of God with the result that when they cast about for the wisdom which, once possessed, they lightly spurned, true wisdom had left and never returned. “Then shall they call upon me, but I will not answer; they shall seek me early, but they shall not find me: For that they hated knowledge, and did not choose the fear of the Lord.” “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” It is likewise a fearful thing to be accounted a fool by the living God, to be numbered with the foolish virgins, or the foolish rich man to whom God said, “Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee.”

Let us note it well, therefore, and may it be burned into our hearts: Here is the only true wisdom in all the world, this foolish preaching of Christ crucified! Here is the pearl without price, the wisdom which speaks to us in the book of Proverbs, “The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his way, before his works of old. It was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was. When there were no depths I was brought forth; when there were no fountains abounding with water. Before the mountains were settled, before the hills was I brought forth... Then I was by him, as one brought up with him; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him.” This is the wisdom which God in his mercy has given us. This is the one wisdom which we want for our children and which we desire for all others. May we thank God for it. May we value it highly, guard it well, hold to it zealously, and teach it fervently! It is found alone in Christ: The fear of the Lord, the beginning of wisdom.